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CIA Calls for Tough Federal Secrets Law

By RONALD J. OSTROW, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—The Central Intelligence Agency is urging the Reagan Administration to ask Congress to make it a federal crime for government employees to disclose national security information, but the proposal seems to be winning little support elsewhere in government, intelligence sources said Wednesday.

The proposal, a part of the CIA's annual budget authorization request, would impose a maximum penalty of five years in prison and \$25,000 fine on present or former government employees convicted of willfully disclosing classified information to persons not authorized to receive it.

Proposal Not Solicited

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes said that the proposal had not been solicited by the White House and that "it remains to be seen" whether President Reagan would support it.

Justice Department officials, speaking on condition that they not be identified, said the department contends that such disclosure of classified data can already be prosecuted under statutes covering espionage and the theft of government property.

They added that proposing a new law now could undercut a pending prosecution in a federal court in Baltimore of a civilian employee of the Navy accused of giving secret military photographs to a British naval magazine.

However, other sources said CIA Director William J. Casey believes that a clearer, tougher law is needed as a deterrent. Katherine H. Pherson, a CIA spokeswoman, refused to comment on the CIA's authorization request, saying that it is considered to be an internal document.

Under the proposal, a person accused of violating the law could successfully defend himself by establishing that he had not obtained the information through his government service, that it had been previously published or that it had not been properly classified.

Based on National Security

Information would be regarded as properly classified if its disclosure "reasonably could be expected to damage the national security," the proposal says.

Without commenting directly on the proposal, Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese III contended Wednesday that reducing government over-classification of material and then persuading the news media not to disclose classified information "is ultimately the solution to the whole problem."

"We have far too much classified information in the federal government," Meese said in responding to questions at a Washington Press Club lunch. "I think a lot of things that shouldn't be classified are, and therefore there is a ho-hum attitude toward the protection of national security information."